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## **Civility and Diplomacy: Trust and Dissimulation in Transnational Afghan Trading Networks**

**Professor Magnus Marsden (Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex)**

m.marsden@sussex.ac.uk

Department of Anthropology

School of Global Studies

University of Sussex

Brighton, BN1 9RH

Tel: 0044 1273 606755 ext. 2312

Magnus Marsden is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex and Director of the Sussex Asia Centre. He is author of *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier* (CUP, 2005) and *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers* (Hurst and OUP 2016). Along with Benjamin D. Hopkins he is also the author of *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (Hurst and OUP 2012).

### **Abstract**

This article explores the relationship between civility and diplomacy in the transnational commercial activities of traders from Afghanistan. The commodity traders on which the article focuses – most of whom are involved in the export and wholesale of commodities made in China - form long-distance networks that criss-cross multiple parts of Asia and are rooted in multiple trading nodes across the region, including the Chinese commercial city of Yiwu, Moscow, and Odessa. Much scholarship associates both diplomacy and civility with impression management and dissimulation and therefore identifies such modes of behaviour

as being inimical to the fashioning of enduring ties of trust. Analysis of ethnographic material concerning the traders' understandings of being diplomatic as well as the ways in which they seek to conform to contested local notions of civility, however, furnishes unique insights into the ways in which they build the social relationships and ties of trust on which their commercial activities depend. By exploring the interrelationship between civility and diplomacy, the article seeks to move anthropological debate beyond the question of whether civility is either a form of artifice premised on performance or a deeper ethical virtue in and of itself. It suggests, rather, the extent to which ambiguity, ambivalence, contradiction, and imperfection are an inbuilt aspect of the ways in which respect is communicated and evaluated, and ties of trust fashioned and maintained.

**Keywords:** civility, diplomacy, trade, trading networks, Afghanistan, commerce, trust, dissimulation

## **Introduction**

This article deploys the concept of civility as an analytical device to illuminate the everyday lives and commercial strategies of transnational Afghan merchants. The merchants with whom I have been conducting fieldwork since 2006 often refer to themselves as being 'diplomats' and exhort one another to 'act diplomatically' in the interests both of the particular business partnerships they form, as well as of the commercial activities of Afghan traders more generally (see Marsden 2016b, 2016c). I suggest in this article that a consideration of diplomacy's significance to these merchants' modes of agency is complemented by a focus on the forms of civility they also cultivate and value. Both concepts offer critical insights into the ways in which the traders build the social relationships and ties of trust on which their work depends. For these Afghan merchants, being diplomatic refers to possessing the skills and

abilities to move within and across complex political and cultural contexts, including being multi-lingual, culturally informed and sensitive, as well as being knowledgeable about the state of political and economic affairs in different settings. Importantly, while the merchants inhabit a world in which state structures are fragile and profoundly unstable, the region from which they hail is one in which the symbolic force of the international state system has been experienced in intense ways by local populations, especially during and in the wake of the ‘global Cold War’ (Nunan 2015; Westad 2009).

Against this backdrop, the article focuses on the ways in which the play of both diplomacy and civility is helpful in enabling the traders to produce multiple types of connections, between places and people, and in fraught geopolitical contexts. Importantly, being diplomatic for the traders also involves the demonstration of the levels of self-control (*khud giri*) that are required to conceal true feelings (*ehsosothoyi haqiqi*). Traders often remark that they are able to suppress what are understood by more ‘straightforward’ or ‘simple’ (*soda*) people in Afghanistan to be natural emotional responses to intolerable events, especially fraudulent and deceitful behaviour. For the traders, such forms of self-control raise questions about how it is possible to forge ties of trust in a context in which dissimulation is a pervasive aspect of everyday behaviour. In this respect, there are close parallels between the notion of diplomacy that the traders hold and recent scholarly discussions of civility: central to both concepts are an element of self-making.

### **Civility in Social Theory: Between Trust and Dissimulation**

Many social thinkers – including, notably, Montesquieu, Hume and Smith -- have sought to understand the effect of the development of ‘market society’ on human sentiments,

relationships and morality. For these thinkers writing in the context of early modern Europe, the emergence of market society provided the conditions for the negation of the type of moral anxieties that my Afghan trader informants have about simultaneously needing to be both diplomatic and morally upstanding. Smith was concerned with more than just maximisation as a driving force behind human action (e.g. Calhoun 2010; Rothschild 2002). Smith argued, rather, that civility was both produced and made necessary by urban bourgeois capitalism. For Smith, the development of market society created spheres of disinterested human action, facilitating the emergence of the notion of ‘pure friendship’ (Silver 1990). At the same time, however, while creating new forms of disinterestedness, success in the market also required individuals to acknowledge their dependence on others. In a world in which loyalty was no longer derived from pre-existing personal relationships, individuals had to consider how others perceived them, and to be open to others, on the assumption of future reciprocity. For Smith, the cultivation of behaviour regarded as ‘decent’ is the most likely avenue to create sympathy.

Civility from this standpoint is fundamentally concerned with everyday forms of social interactions, and the management of appearances and omissions in the context of these (Hirschman 1997; Langford 1998; Silver 1990). Those who build on Smith’s theory regard impression management as being central to civility, often defined simply as the communication of respect (see the Introduction). These social theorists were, of course, analysing the dynamics of inter-personal relationships in a historical period that is different in multiple respects from that inhabited by my informants today. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that comparing moral debates across historical periods is unable to shed light on changes and continuities in local understandings and debates about respectful behaviour.<sup>1</sup> The focus by these thinkers on the centrality of inter-personal communication to the performance of respect chimes with recent attempts by scholars of the Middle East to theorise ‘bottom-up

embodiments and social understandings of the respectable, the debatable and the disreputable' (Volpi 2011: 838; cf. Calhoun 2010). Anthropologists have sought to understand for example how far the meaningful exchange of viewpoints is a feature of interpersonal discussion in settings in which ritualised forms of politeness (e.g. *tarof* in Iran) are influential or whether such practices merely facilitate the instrumental display of respect (e.g. Beeman 2003).

The tension between the significance of honourable and trustworthy conduct on the one hand and the ability to be tricky and flexible on the other is an important theme in older and more recent studies of merchants (e.g. Herzig 2016; Anderson 2011; Lee 2002; Osella and Osella 2009). The traders with whom I have been working emphasise the importance of forms of flexibility, skill, wit, and cleverness (which are central to the working lives and strategies of people belonging to this and very many other trading networks) have for their modes of making a living. They are clear that behaving in this manner leads them open to the accusation of being duplicitous and insincere both by the populations amongst whom they work and their fellow traders. At the same time as being diplomatic, the traders also work hard to demonstrate that they are simultaneously sincere (*mukhlis*) and trustable (*ba itihbor*) people, especially to their friends (*dostho*) and business partners (*sharikho*).

Yet while the notion of diplomacy evinced by the traders overlaps in certain respects with broad scholarly understandings of civility as 'practices and norms aimed at promoting restraint and respect in the face of difference' (Introduction to this volume; Connolly 1999; Sennett 1976; Shils 1992), in other respects the two concepts are implicated in a tense and ambiguous relationship in the traders' moral worlds. Anthropological attempts to understand the role played by trust in social relationships stands to benefit from an approach that explores diplomacy and civility in a single sphere of human activity. Such an approach should

document the ways in which these two modes of creating and managing social ties both overlap and inform one another, while also being implicated in a fraught relationship. Exploring this relationship reveals how civility is helpful in the analysis of peoples' modes of handling social diversity only if its internal contradictions and roots in 'human imperfectability' (Glick Schiller and Irving 2015: 8) are recognised as being as much a part of what it connotes as the respect of difference. In what follows, then, I seek to show how my informant's recognition of the diplomacy of their daily activities brings light on the forms of cunning and dissimulation that are also closely connected to the performance of civility, as well as to the ways in which particular social networks handle the moral implications of behaving in this manner.

### **Merchants and Morality: Ethnographic Perspectives**

Merchants have occupied an important role in both older and newer approaches to civility in social theory, anthropology and ethnography. Anthropologists of India have documented the extent to which merchants mediated between the worlds of power and violence and non-violent trade (Babb 2004). Merchants have also played a critical role in attempts made by scholars of Islam to understand the role played by cooperation and trust in Muslim commercial life (Geertz 1978; Rodinson 2007). In her work on futures traders in Chicago and London, Caitlin Zaloom (2006) emphasises the manner in which even in this type of economic activity, trade is continually embedded in people's moral universes, patterns of sociality, and modes of self-making.

The merchants explored in this article enrich these discussions in two major ways. Firstly, a brief consideration of Afghanistan's modern history would suggest that it is the type of context

in which the forms of civility envisioned by Smith as being required to stave off violence in heterogeneous societies have neither developed nor been cultivated by local actors. As the article demonstrates, however, the capacity to fashion relationships across vexed boundaries in such settings achieves heightened forms of daily significance becoming both a culturally and morally embellished feature of social life, and one that is a source of conscious reflection. This recall's the way in which Bruce Grant (2011: 658) has distinguished the forms of life important and valued in settings of 'open' and 'closed' sovereignty. In contexts of open sovereignty people's everyday lives are characterised by interlacing forms of 'dependence and independence', and life proceeds on the general principle that 'every battle is followed by the bright of day when economic trade across unfriendly lines need resume and intermarriages can be sought to dim the enemy'. By contrast, situations of closed sovereignty 'follow battles over the perceived right to indefinite rule, where a vanquished foe has no place but in acquiescence and dissolution'.

The principles of life in settings of fluid and contested open sovereignty are, therefore, easily ill-understood if they are treated as being mere indicators of incivility. Norbert Elias argued that the emergence of the state and its monopoly over violence created the conditions for the development of 'civility'. Yet a consideration of life in settings of open sovereignty reveals forms of civility that exist 'outside formal institutional frameworks' (Volpi 2011: 838) and are related in a fluent and ambiguous way to state power and authority. Surviving in world regions failed by the nation-state system has required individuals and social groups to establish durable relationships of trade and exchange across the boundaries of ethnicity, language and nationality, and without the support of the legal and administrative organs of the state (Nunan 2015). For mobile Afghan merchants, the pressures of leading transnational lives in the context



of fragile state structures has resulted in them embodying and purposively cultivating the modes of diplomacy and civility on which their work depends.

Secondly, both classic and more recent ethnographic accounts of civility conceptualise the forms of conduct with which it is associated as both originating in and of being of especial significance to urban settings (cf. Sennett 1976; Shils 1992; for a notable exception see Bailey 1996). The traders discussed in this article (many of whom are recent migrants to urban areas from Afghanistan's provinces) might be thought of as being a class apart from the urban merchants associated with civility's emergence in 'market society' (compare Anderson this volume; cf. Picard 2005). Indeed, merchant life in secure cities is often associated with the emergence of 'thick' or virtuous forms of civility (see the Introduction). By contrast, long distance traders who profit from differences between the state of affairs in one place and that of another might be more easily associated with forms of behaviour that approximate 'thin' or instrumental modes of civility: such traders are indeed widely represented as being hard-nosed profiteers (Goodhand 2009).

Thus, while some of the traders explored in this article have been born and raised in Afghanistan's historic commercial cities (Herat, Qandahar, Kabul and Mazar-i Sharif), the histories of others lie in Afghanistan's rural regions and its 'trading tribes': 'social formations' that historians of the country have documented as playing a critical role in connecting the country to world markets since at least the early nineteenth century (Hanifi 2011; Hopkins 2009; Ferdinand 2006; Tapper 2007). Today, such actors are widely associated with the type of 'clandestine economies' that Boyd has suggested 'contribute little or nothing to a society's stock of civility'; indeed, as Boyd also notes, such actors are 'bearers of incivility' (Boyd 2006: 875) because normative theories of civility such as that developed by Edward Shils

interpret civility as functioning for the maintenance of ‘order’ (see Introduction). In Afghanistan elite-urban discourses frequently distinguish between people of civility and high culture (*tamadun; mardumho-yi farhangi*) from others who are animalistic (*wahshi*), hailing ‘from the provinces’ (*atrof*) or ‘tribal regions’ (*qabail*), and involved in illegal activities (*korhoye ghair qonuni*), such as cross-border smuggling (*qochogi*). Elite Afghans often lament that the social dynamics of Kabul has been irrevocably undermined by migrants from the provinces for whom it will take years to ‘become urban/e’ (*shahri budan*).

By referring to themselves as ‘diplomats’, the traders are openly highlighting their capacity to pragmatically switch between different ‘selves’ or present their ‘self’ in a strategic way. In the face of their exclusion from discourses of civility by Afghan urban elites who define respectful urban/e behaviour as arising from long-term immersion in urban culture, they are also bringing attention to the skills, knowledge and competencies that their mode of making a living requires (cf. Christelow 2012). Importantly, however, the traders regularly seek to advance their own model of civility rather than behave in a manner that conforms to elite discourse. As one trader in his late forties who hails from a town on the Shomali plains but now imports shawls from China and India to Kabul’s Mandawi market, remarked to me as he sat down to eat a plate of rice with his hands, having invited me to his Kabul home for a meal, ‘I’m a boy from the provinces (*bachoye atrof*) so won’t apologise for eating with my hands; you can eat with a spoon or your hands, whatever is your wish’.

Bringing theoretical debates about the notion of civility into a conversation with the traders’ understanding of diplomacy, focuses attention on the simultaneous and co-constituted nature of both the ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ aspects of the ‘practices and norms’ they deploy in order to promote ‘restraint and respect in the face of difference’. The traders strive to demonstrate

themselves as being capable of sincere and decent behaviour despite the negative associations that the country's political and culture elite often hold about their activities and modes of making a living. A combination of civility and diplomacy allows the traders to work across vexed political spaces and forge relationships across multiple boundaries; this combination is critical to the fashioning of the long-distance and transnational commercial networks that the traders form.

### **Beyond Community: Multi-Nodal Afghan Trading Networks**

The article is based on ethnographic research that I have carried out with traders of Afghan background in a variety of settings including Afghanistan, the former Soviet Union, Turkey and China. My fieldwork has been multi-sited and conducted over a ten-year period. I commenced the research on Afghan trading networks in 2006 through an exploration of the activities of traders from Afghanistan in the bazaars of Tajikistan (especially in the capital city of Dushanbe and the northern city of Khujand), documenting their ties through trade and business to both Pakistan and Iran, as well as the forms of being Muslim that were critical to their social relationships across national boundaries (Marsden and Hopkins 2012). During the course of this research, I discovered that the individuals whom I had come to know in Tajikistan were also connected commercially to traders from Afghanistan based in Russia (especially in the cities of Moscow, Rostov-on-Don, Krasnodar, and Stavropol), Ukraine (in Odessa, Kiev, and Kharkov), and China (notably in Urumqi, Yiwu, and Guangzhou).

To better understand the activities of these traders I conducted 11 months of fieldwork between 2012 and 2013 in Russia, Ukraine and China; this fieldwork was followed by two further month-long trips each to Russia and Ukraine. I spent time in the traders' shops and homes

exploring the nature of their connections to one another, the commodities in which they dealt, and the routes along which these were transported (Marsden 2016c). Most recently I have explored the role played by traders from multiple national and ethnic background, including those from Afghanistan, in connecting the Chinese trading city of Yiwu -a globally important node in the wholesale of low cost ‘commodities of daily use’ (e.g. Belguidom and Pliez 2014; Marsden 2016a, 2017b) - to markets across the world. Methodologically, by observing individual traders operating in multiple contexts I have sought to explore their experiences of life and business in contrasting transnational contexts, and document the shifting geographies of the trading networks they form. Thus, I have travelled to meet the friends, partners and associates of my principal informants in the various settings in which they work.

These traders of Afghan background do not form a homogeneous ‘social group’. Nor do they form an ethnically or linguistically homogeneous trading network. The traders are, rather, differentiated according to markers of status, wealth, and position in trading hierarchies; such forms of difference also intersect with, yet are never simply defined by, the traders’ ‘ethnic’ and linguistic identities. Traders identify with a wide range of ethnic groups, including Turkmen, Hazara, Uzbek, Tajik, and Pashtun; yet treating ethno-linguistic identity as being the most salient aspect of their worlds and social relationships is overly-simplifying: most if not all trader have business partnerships with men who identify with individuals from Afghanistan yet of very different backgrounds from their own, including those which cross religious boundaries, for example, between Hindu and Muslim (Marsden 2017b).

In terms of this article’s focus on the relevance of both diplomacy and civility to an analysis of their activities and modes of agency, it is important to note that past political affiliation is a factor around which Afghan trading relationship do often coalesce. The traders whose

activities are documented in this article are contrasted by elites in the country to an earlier generation of merchants who not only came from respectable urban families (often from Central Asia's historic cities; see Jalallari 2013), but also earned names for dealing in high-value foreign goods (e.g. Fry 1974). These traders left Afghanistan during the 1970s in the context of growing political instability and in what turned out to be the run-up to war in the country. As a son of one of Afghanistan's best-known merchant families whose relatives mostly left the country in the 1970s and is currently based in Dubai and Istanbul told me, 'we don't work in Afghanistan anymore as doing so would require us to sell the cheapest goods on the market and thus to lose our reputation globally'. By contrast, traders who have come to prominence in Afghanistan over the last forty years, are easily depicted as profiteers who deal in low-grade commodities and folk who lack upbringing (*tarbiya*) and high culture (*tamadun*). Indeed, the dangers that trading in Afghanistan poses to an individual or family's commercial and moral reputation has amplified in the wake of the US-led invasion of the country in 2001, and the global attention that this has brought to the inter-penetration of the commercial and political fields of the country's newly established 'democracy' (cf. Giustozzi 2010).

Many of my informants worked for Soviet-aligned states in the 1980s. However, the past ideological and political attachments of traders associated to Afghanistan socialist and communist movements, parties and organisations are also complex and diverse: some worked as state officials; others were directly affiliated to the Afghan socialist party (PDPA) and trained in 'Party Schools' in Central Asia—still more were tied by bonds of kin, neighbourhood, and friendship to former state officials yet were themselves not employed by the state. The fact that some of the traders share a background as officials in the Afghan state during the 1970s and 1980s helps to explain the symbolic and rhetorical importance with which they invest the category of diplomacy: many were educated in Soviet-sponsored higher

education programmes and shared university dormitories with students from other countries in the Soviet-aligned world (Marsden 2015; cf. S. Bayly 2007).

The traders' background as officials in the Afghan government and the country's security services also explains their decision to trade and work in the countries of the former Soviet Union and China: having been employed by organisations such as Afghanistan's security services (KhAD) some are unable to apply for asylum in North America and Western Europe because KhAD employees have been treated as war criminals (Bahtiyar 2011). While employed as Afghan state employees in Afghanistan during the 1980s these men established contacts with individuals in the Soviet security services – such relationships were critical in allowing them to gain access to Russian travel documents and passports, as well as to officials in the country's customs departments. Importantly, the forms of trust that were central to these men's political and working relationships during the years of the Soviet occupation have often been the basis of the trading networks they form today. Soviet-trained fighter pilots are often active today in the running of transport companies, a type of work that requires strong bonds of trust and the ability to interact and communicate transnationally.

The traders with whom I work do not form a rigidly bounded ethnic or kin-based 'trading community' (cf. Falzon 2005). It is more helpful to consider the forms of commercial cooperation central to their activities in relationship to analytical work on trading networks. Historians working on long-distance trade, such as Aslanian, have identified two major types of trading network: monocentric and polycentric. In his study of the Armenian merchant community of New Julfa, Aslanian argues that this merchant grouping constituted a 'multinodal monocentric network'. While multiple trading nodes were critical to the activities of New Julfa's Armenians, most of the objects circulating through the network had their

origins in New Julfa a single dominant ‘nodal center’ that ‘defines and regulates the identity and economic vitality of the network as a whole’ (Aslanian 2014: 15). In contrast, ‘multinodal polycentric’ trading networks have no ‘one nodal center that dominated most aspects of ...[the lives of merchants and members of the same community’ (Aslanian 2014: 15; cf. Trivellato 2009) but instead operated from numerous centres, each of which is important to varying degrees for the activities of the trading network.

The different structures that trading networks took also had a significant effect on the types of commercial established by the traders who made them up: networks that focused their commercial activities in relationship to a single centre tended to privilege partnerships with individuals internal to the network. By contrast, polycentric networks more frequently developed relationships with individuals external to the network. The activities of Afghanistan’s long-distance merchants are connected to several trading centres: some of which are especially significant to their collective activities (e.g. Yiwu, Moscow, and Odessa), yet none of which assumes overwhelming importance. Furthermore, while kin- and ethnicity-based relationships are of significance in shaping the commercial relationship of Afghan traders, the capacity to develop ties to merchants who are external to the network is also highly valued (e.g. Marsden 2015).

Comparing models of trading networks that were active in the 15th to 19th centuries with the commercial activities conducted by mobile communities in the world today clearly raises conceptual issues. Most obviously, the literature on trading networks in the early modern period argues that such social formations played a critical role in connecting distant parts of the globe because of the ‘feeble standardization and homogenization of international markets’ (Trivellato 2007: 138). By contrast, all the traders with whom I work function in contexts

influenced by neo-liberal forms of market economy; some indeed also hold considerable influence in such markets. Nevertheless, making comparisons across conventional historical periods brings recognition to the ways in which different modes of organising economic life – capitalism, mercantilism, neoliberalism, to name but a few – do not merely emerge and displace one another in an evolutionary or teleological manner. They exert and sustain, rather, long-lasting influences – what Jane Guyer (2004) refers to as ‘traces’ – on different societies, regions, and contexts. Indeed, insofar as neoliberalism is a form of unregulated capitalism, it is also tempting to draw stronger parallels with older modes of organising economic life, albeit recognising significant differences, especially the focus on consumption.

### **Spaces of Diplomacy: Trading Offices and Merchant Homes**

Bruno Latour (2007) has noted that diplomats trouble the boundary between ‘morality’ and ‘pragmatism’ (cf. Cornago 2013). On the one hand, a diplomat’s skill in the use of words, capacity to engage in the redefinition of argument, and ability to refine the requirements held by parties immersed in disputes with one another, are what makes them ‘clever’, yet these same qualities also risk their being rendered into scapegoats as ‘unscrupulous traitors’ (Latour 2007; cf. Marsden 2016). On the other hand, the figure of the culturally attuned merchant able to ‘be at home everywhere’ has been shown to play a critical role in the dynamics of ethnically and racially diverse urban contexts in Euro-American settings and beyond (e.g. Lee 2002). Merchants, in short, straddle a complex duality between slippery diplomacy and sincere forms of civility, suggesting both these categories can be thought of as belonging to an overlapping if anxious field of human endeavour.



Many traders deem diplomacy and the forms of dishonesty or dissimulation that it also evokes, as being necessary for them to cross the region's national and internal borders, establish relations with people from different backgrounds, and pragmatically maintain relationships with traders comprising the networks they form. As with merchants and traders in many different context, my informants do strive to be honest (*drust*) and honourable (*baghayrat*) men, and consider reputation (*ghayrat*), trustworthiness (*ihtibor*), and name (*nom*) as central to their ability to make a living as commodity traders (cf. Geertz 1978). The traders with whom I work however are mobile and need to operate across borders: this makes it inherently more difficult for them - as compared to more sedentary merchants - to achieve and maintain such qualities. If the 'spatial distance' created by mobility 'allows' 'contradictory assertions to be made simultaneously without being brought into confrontation', and, therefore, presents the *temptation* of deceitfulness (Ho 2002: 15; Herzig 2016), then the ambiguities that arise out of such mobility and forms of daily practice are also a source of reflection and concern for many of the traders.

Importantly, while diplomacy raises questions about authenticity, the suspicion that a person's mode of behaving might conceal more authentic inner attitudes does not mean that being restrained and respectful in the face of difference is not also a simultaneously important aspect of the social relationship-building activities of the traders. In relation to the recognised need to simultaneously conform to notions of diplomacy and civility, the traders frequently also ask where the boundary lies between diplomacy and the pragmatic type of behaviour required of traders, on the one hand, and reputable forms of decency and trustworthiness, on the other. Traders often say that even the best of friends and the longest-term partners (*sharikho*) will act in a fraudulent manner (*bozi dodan*) with one another, yet that there is 'fraud and there is fraud'. In other words, traders make nuanced judgements about forms of dissimulation that

are ethically problematic, and those deemed not worthy as being judged in this manner (cf. Shklar 1985; Runciman 2009). Anthropologists have addressed the relationship between civility and hypocrisy, and additionally the ways in which formal discourses of civility are often deployed to exclude individuals and groups deemed to be uncivil. This body of work often addresses such issues by way of ethnographic material on culturally distinctive forms of politeness and etiquette. Chinese *guanxixue*, for example, is the conduct of ‘deferential acts, comportment of generosity, and modest speech’ in a manner that involves both ‘ethics’ and the strategic deployment of an ‘arsenal of tactics’ (Yang 1994).

Afghan traders’ conception of diplomacy similarly condenses the skills that people are expected to deploy both to survive in and profit from their world and to relate to categories of person different from themselves. Almost all traders openly recognise that their modes of being diplomatic reflect not merely their own self-interest but also that an element of untruthfulness is also an essential part of their work. It is only natural for the seller (*furishondah*) of a wealthy merchant’s (*tojir*) to make some extra cash here and there, even if it means deceiving his patron. Should a shopkeeper undercut the prices and profits of neighbouring Afghans in a bazaar far away from home, however, he is inviting more serious evaluations of his character. In this sense, civility for Afghan traders requires the ability to forge and maintain relationships of business and friendship in a world in which forms of behaviour characterised by their dissimulating aspects are all-pervasive. Rather than automatically presenting themselves as ‘good’ and ‘morally upstanding’ actors, the traders openly reflect on the diplomatic dimensions of their behaviour that they are aware could easily and simplistically be interpreted as hypocritical. This degree of self-awareness demonstrates how far both the forms of diplomacy and civility advocated by the traders are inherently self-reflexive.

The traders actively and consciously exhort one another to ‘act diplomatically’ and the physical space of their trading offices (*daftar—i tijorati*) is often a site in which civility, trust and reputation is taught and tested. During a visit to Mazar-e Sharif in 2009, for example, I stayed with a trader whom I had initially got to know in Tajikistan the previous winter. In Tajikistan, the trader was both involved in the trade of Afghan products such as raisins to the markets of Russia, as well as the export of products from Tajikistan (such as animal skins) to Afghanistan. Over the duration of the stay, he introduced me to many of his business partners, past and present. At the time, the trader was seeking to become involved in the import of Russian-made soap to Afghanistan. One of his key business partners, however, had the tendency of being hot-headed and aggressive, especially with clients and partners he accused of untrustworthy behaviour.

For instance, one man with whom the two men had worked was a former Afghan Army General (whom I had met in Tajikistan after he had made a trip to the country and stayed with my friend). During his stay in Tajikistan, my host entertained the General by taking him to restaurants and discotheques and offering him lavish hospitality by local standards. The General, however, had taken \$10,000 worth of goods on credit from him, and failed to pay this significant sum of money back. One day on entering the traders’ office, my friend’s business partner became angry (*qahr kard*) and emotional (*ehsosoti*) and had shouted at the General accusing him of stealing their money. A few days later, my friend publicly admonished his business partner, saying that to be successful in trade one must never become emotional but must always, instead, act diplomatically. In this example, there is overlap between the concept of civility and the ways in which diplomacy is employed by my informants: both involve forms of self-making in which individuals must cultivate practises

of self-disciplined behaviour, albeit with the interests of their businesses and business partners at heart, rather than the achievement of an ethnical virtue per se. In the context of Afghanistan, this form of self-making challenges local ideals of honour and autonomy - the fact that it does so makes both finessed forms of diplomacy and civility morally ambiguous.

The enactment of civility however is also important to the traders outside of the context of their trading offices. The home (*khona*) – or, when abroad, living quarter (*otoq*) – is also an important setting in which civility is enacted and displayed. Hospitality is of critical importance to the ways in which the traders create and sustain social relationships and networks amongst themselves and with the communities in which they live (Marsden 2011). The provision of hospitality is often a fraught arena of the traders' daily lives: it is a type of social event where the intersection between morality and instrumental behaviour become especially evidently interlinked. Traders hold nuanced ideas about the degrees of sincerity associated with different modes of being hospitable. Many traders argue that 'traditional' (*sunnati*) forms of Afghan hospitality are excessive and designed to pressure (*fishur*) guests to recognise the generosity of the host rather than make possible the forging of durable, sincere, and mutually beneficial friendship (*dosthoye samimi/waqiana*).

The comparison between forms of hospitality inflected by power (*qudrat*), control and violence (*zuri*), and others that are said to be sincere (*samimi*) often reflects the traders' travel experiences. Traders who have worked in Russia, for example, comment that Russian forms of hospitality are superior to 'Afghan' ones because they allow the guest to demonstrate their true feelings rather than there merely conforming to social norms. It is often remarked, for instance, that in Russia being hospitable means being invited to someone's home, shown to the fridge, and told that whatever is in it – a bottle of vodka or a cured sausage – is theirs to

enjoy. This relates to discourses important for the traders about authentic behaviour and how this is to be distinguished from the calculated forms of impression management and instrumentalism that they openly recognise one another to perform.

A critical context in which such aspects of civil behaviour is demonstrated for example is in the domain of house design. Many traders who work outside of Afghanistan maintain their families or at least a family home inside the country. Traders able to afford frequent visits home – such expenditure being confined not simply to their own travel expenses but also high-value gifts such as the latest mobile phones to family members, as well as the commercial and political contacts on which their work depends – travel to the country to be with family during the Eid festivals and the Spring Equinox festival, Nowruz. The design of the traders' Afghanistan homes frequently reflects the influences of the country in which they are working.

One of my informants, a Pashto-speaker from eastern Afghanistan, who has business interests in both Russia and the UK, showed me how he had installed a Russian-style *banya* (steam room) in his Kabul home. In August 2015, after a gap nearly five years, I returned to the home in Mazar-e Sharif of the above-mentioned trader. During my previous visits, I had stayed in the guest room of his mud-brick home (*khona-ye gili*) located in one of the city's peripheral neighbourhoods, and he had been delighted to gather his relatives (*kheshu qawm*) from across northern Afghanistan. On my return in 2015, I found the traders' living conditions to have been dramatically transformed. In the intervening years, he had secured a series of contracts with American transport companies responsible for moving American military equipment out of Afghanistan using a northern supply route that passed through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, countries in which he had worked as a trader for over a decade. The business has been successful if difficult: in Kyrgyzstan he had discovered that there were powerful mafia

interests operating in the transport sector, and these had meant that he had even needed to appoint a bodyguard to work with him, as well as been called to meetings with powerful mafia bosses – meetings that called upon him to use the most sophisticated forms of diplomacy that he had learned over more than 15 years of trading in the former Soviet Republics.

The trader, however, had invested much of the profit he had made from these activities into organising the wedding of his two sons, buying a plot of land, and – as is normal in this and other trading communities – to build a new house. The house however was not the normal type of palatial structure with flashy external design features that are often found in urban Afghanistan today. Rather, the trader had invested money into constructing a basement room for guests that included a built-in kitchen and shower room, as well as thirteen Central Asian style beds that were layered into the walls of the room. In addition, the house was replete with its very own stage – on which he invited local musicians to perform – as well as a karaoke system; the walls were decorated with textiles that he had brought from various neighbouring Central Asian countries. During the course of my visit, I was served cool German beer stored in the guestroom's specially allocated fridge. The traders' home can be thought as a manifestation of the type of 'local cosmopolitanism' (Ho 2002) that has been described for other trading communities: a vehicle through which the traders' connections and successes abroad could be materialised and demonstrated to others in the community (e.g. Osella and Osella 2007).

In terms of the traders' own thinking, however, rather than marking his ability to be a 'world citizen', this aspect of the traders' home was reflecting his ability to be diplomatic – to incorporate the influences of the various contexts in which he has worked and travelled in his home, while continuing to be loyal to Afghanistan and his regional culture. At the same time,

however, it was also clear during our conversation that the house was about more than either displaying his commercial success and acumen through valuable objects or the display of the breadth and depth of his international connections and thus personal competence. The trader remarked to me, for example, that he had insisted on building a kitchen within the guest home so that his friends would be able to do as they wish, without having ‘anything to do’ with the women of the home. This was also why he had installed the inbuilt beds in the houses’ walls: it prevented the need for ‘people of the house’ (*khonawadaho*) to enter the guestroom to help sort out the sleeping arrangements of the guests, as is usually the case in traditional arrangements for guests in Afghanistan. The guest house, in short, took a step towards realising the ambition of the traders to lead a life in which ‘no one has work with others’ – a type of free and respect-based association between individuals, which they contrast to conventional modes of living in Afghanistan.

### **Enacting Civility: Principal Merchants and Commission Agents**

As is the case with many dispersed trading networks, traders occupying different positions in merchant hierarchies are required to have ties and dependencies to those at multiple levels (Aslanian 2011; Trivellato 2009). Far from being traders between remote regions, several of my informants are merchants involved in global trading activities, thereby also exerting considerable influence on national and regional political dynamics, as well as the market dynamics market of particular categories of goods (Marsden 2016b). Such merchants identify themselves as being wealthy ‘principal merchants’ (*tojir*) involved in trading activities that require investments of up to 5 million US dollars. The activities of these merchants include the import of vehicle and aeroplane fuel to Afghanistan from Turkmenistan, as well as the trade in commodities between China and multiple settings across Asia. Major companies who

began by trading in Afghanistan are now involved in the international agency-based trade of Korean and Indian-made cigarettes, as well as of branded tea: the annual turnover of such companies lies in the millions of US dollars. The majority of traders with whom I work, however, trade on a much smaller scale: working as ‘percentage workers’ (*commission kor*) for the wealthy merchants described above (*tojir*). It is their job to find, for a percentage charge, a buyer for the products of the merchants for whom they work.

Despite the fact that the traders are differentially positioned in complex trading hierarchies, principal merchants and commission workers must establish durable social relationships with one another. The commission workers visit and work in contexts that are frequently too insecure for principal merchants - individuals of power and wealth - to physically visit. Such merchants, for example, require security in the form of bodyguards and armoured vehicles when visiting Afghanistan, mostly because of the risk of kidnap for ransom by criminal groups. A trader from northern Afghanistan - currently based in Turkey and Dubai, where he is involved in the dry fruit trade - told me that he never visits Afghanistan, principally because the costs of arranging security are too high.

In what ways are diplomacy and civility enfolded into the social relationships of such categories of traders, both within and across hierarchical boundaries? In order to address this concern, I focus in what follows on two traders who both identify themselves as being ethnically Turkmen, and are also from the northern Afghanistan (Mazar-e Sharif).<sup>2</sup> Despite their shared ethnic and regional background, the two men have experienced contrasting forms of mobility since the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR. These different experiences have affected the social worlds in which they live and the geographies of the settings in which they work and trade.



Abdul is an ethnic Turkmen from a town in north-western Afghanistan called Andkhuy. As is the case with many other ethnically Uzbek and Turkmen families in northern Afghanistan (e.g. Shalinsky 1993), his father migrated from what was at the time Soviet Turkestan to Afghanistan in the wake of the Stalinist purges of the 1920s. Abdul's family moved in the 1970s to a largely Turkmen neighbourhood in the city of Mazar-e Sharif and his father worked in the sale of skins and intestines, goods that were procured and treated in Afghanistan, and sold globally (cf. Crews 2015). Abdul himself was educated during the late 1980s in Mazar-e Sharif's Engineering Faculty. The political climate in the early 1990s made formal employment in the state or in established companies extremely difficult. In addition, Abdul tells me how the Turkmen community in general and his father in particular warned their children not to take one or other side (*yak taraf*) in the conflict between the pro-Soviet government and the opposition mujahidin groups, and, instead to remain 'neutral' (*betaraf*) by not affiliating themselves with any political movements.

For young men such as Abdul, this meant that securing employment in a government positions was essentially impossible. After finishing his studies, Abdul moved to the Central Asian Republics: at the time, the Soviet Union had recently collapsed and travel across the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan was relatively straightforward, mostly through 'buying' the relevant visa at a consulate in Afghanistan. Abdul spent eight years working as an employee (*mulazimin*) for a Turkmen merchant from Afghanistan who was active in the import of petrol to Afghanistan from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. During his time in Turkmenistan, Abdul told me, ethnically Turkmen traders from Afghanistan made significant fortunes exporting petrol to Afghanistan and importing various goods into Turkmenistan (e.g. cars). As the years passed, however, the Turkmen state

imposed restrictions on Afghan traders based in the country, especially through the introduction of strict laws concerning their ability to own property and marry local women. Abdul eventually left Turkmenistan after being pressured to do so by local state officials.

Abdul travelled to Tajikistan and entered the employment of another major Afghan-owned family-run import-export business that focused on the cigarette trade. In Dushanbe, Abdul worked for the company as the person in control of stocking the goods in the warehouse (*sklodchi*). For traders, the warehouse keeper is a critical task, and one that only trustworthy company employees are allowed to undertake: traders say that men who are especially skilled in the field of trade are ‘able to know what is in their warehouse and how much without even consulting their account books (*kitobcha*)’. The success of the trading activities of such powerful international companies is intimately tied to the forms of trustworthiness, skill, and behaviour of the percentage workers (*commisionkors*) who work for them, such as Abdul. As I have explored in detail elsewhere (Marsden 2016b), the *commisionkors* carry out trading activities ‘on the ground’ in Afghanistan and Central Asia—they move goods across borders, find buyers, and engage and pay other commission workers involved in these processes, such as ‘commission workers at borders’.<sup>3</sup> For the years in which Abdul lived in Tajikistan, for example, he ensured the passage of Korean-made cigarettes over the Afghanistan–Tajikistan border, a task that involved him deploying his diplomatic skills to cultivate relationships with officials on both sides of the border. Abdul and many other Afghan traders and merchants emphasise the vast quantities of money—in profits, taxes, and corruption—this trade involved, and, therefore, the extent to which they were trusted by the principal merchants for whom they worked.

As Abdul's case demonstrates, while shared ethnic identity is frequently one basis upon which such trust is formed, this is far from always being the case. Abdul is ethnically Turkmen and he worked as the *sklodchi* for a company owned and staffed largely by ethnically Pashtuns. As such, traders at Abdul's position in trading hierarchies must balance the deployment of diplomacy in their interaction with multiple actors on the grounds in the context in which they work, with the ability to demonstrate sincerity and decent behaviour with the men who run the companies by whom they are employed.

For Abdul, being a successful trader across cultural, national and regional frontiers requires skills in the arts of diplomacy, and Abdul willingly acknowledges his ability to behave in a pragmatic and even sometimes slippery manner. At the same time, however, Abdul's ability to be diplomatic is complemented by his cultivating of a parallel reputation for being a man of his word (*odam-e wafadar ba harfesh*) with his bosses (*raisho*), as well as a sincere (*samimi*) father to his children and friend to those of his associates (*ashnaho*) who wish to enter into 'friendships without purpose' (*dosti beduni kudum maqsad*) with him.

Principal merchants also recognise the simultaneous significance of civil and diplomatic behaviour, as well as reflecting on the complex relationship between these two overlapping categories of action. In order to consider the relationship of principal merchants to these categories of behaviour I will briefly introduce Haji Mirza. While also Turkmen and from the city of Mazar-e Sharif, the forms of world that Haji Mirza has been required to navigate have been considerably different to those of Abdul. Despite only owning a small shop in the northern Afghan town of Aqcha, his family had been labelled 'feudal' by the post-1979 communist regime. After their elderly father had been badly beaten by the police, they were concerned that their members would be targeted further by the country's security services.

Therefore, as a young boy, Haji Mirza went with his family from Afghanistan to Pakistan, where they lived for ten years in a medium-sized town (Haripur) in the north of the country. Over the following ten years, they ran small businesses in Pakistan, most importantly a grocery shop and Public Call Office in Haripur.

After the collapse of the pro-Soviet government in Kabul in 1992 and the rise to power of the mujahidin in the country the family returned to Afghanistan, but, having found conditions too unstable for business, they moved to neighbouring Uzbekistan and then Turkmenistan, where they were based for 12 years. In the aftermath of the defeat of the Taliban by the US and its allies in 2001 they returned to Mazar-e Sharif, and benefited from the influx of foreign capital to the country. They supplied offices for example with stationary that they imported from the UAE. By 2010, however, growing instability in Afghanistan led Haji Mirza to move to Dubai in order to open a trading office, while his elder brother (a local politician in Afghanistan) relocated his family to Istanbul. The youngest of the three brothers remains in Afghanistan overseeing the trade in goods between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan in which the family is involved, but this man's family are also now located in Istanbul.

An important dimension of being diplomatic for principal merchants such as Haji Mirza is the attempts they make to avoid being involved in politics.<sup>4</sup> Merchants such as these remark that a man is good because 'he is a trader not a politician'. Such merchants seek to achieve a reputation for their neutrality for both in the country and during their spells of work abroad. Political neutrality is exemplified in various ways by the traders, including in the modes through which they contribute to charity: doing so in secret rather than in public. Behaving in this manner is also said to distinguish traders who undertake their commercial activities according to an old and enduring commercial culture from newcomers who lack such civility

(*tamadun*), and, instead, boast in television advertisements screened in Afghanistan about how much they give to charity (cf. Osella and Osella 2009). Another domain in which principal merchants such as these are required to exhibit forms of diplomacy that also overlap with accepted and authorised notions of civility is in their dealings with the officials of the nation-states in which they work. It is accepted by traders that merchants such as these must cultivate close relationships with officials in the country's in which they work, as well as with consular officials based in Afghanistan. At the same time, accusations of merchants being 'in the pocket' of the officials of foreign countries is also damaging to a person's reputation for trustworthiness.<sup>5</sup>

A trader currently based in Istanbul, for example, told me how he also operated an office in Dubai. On one occasion, he related to me, the security services of the UAE had randomly used his office to interview Iranian traders operating in the building in which his office was located. The interviews were conducted in the context of considerable hostility between the UAE and Iran. The trader told me that the event had led many other merchants working in the market to assume that he was a partner to the UAE officials in the operation; as a result, his reputation amongst these other merchants had been seriously damaged. Haji Mirza often recounts to me his close relationships with Afghanistan-based officials from the countries in which he trades, yet he is also always keen to point out that he openly disagrees with such men about their government's policies in Afghanistan, telling them that if they are offended it does not matter to him as he has 'no need for their visas'.

The fact that the diplomacy of principal merchants such as Haji Mirza must be sophisticated but not obsequious also demonstrates the gendered nature of the traders' modes of establishing social relationships and trust. While the traders making such long-distance networks identify

with multiple ethno-linguistic communities and are located at different positions in the spectrum of political positions in Afghanistan, commitment to national autonomy and sovereignty is an element of their identities which they frequently and publicly seek to demonstrate. By narrating moments when they demonstrated commitment to Afghanistan even though doing so risked doing considerable damage to their commercial interests, the merchants also enact their commitment to honourable forms of manly autonomy even though they are also skilled in the arts of dissimulation and ‘diplomacy’. Similarly, by performing the pilgrimage to Mecca and being awarded the title ‘Haji’, Haji Mirza publicly enacts his commitment to Islam and the forms of piety it encourages. Yet by simultaneously sharing a glass of vodka in intimate settings with his closest friends, he also reinforces his reputation as a man who is flexible rather than rigid in his thinking and behaviour, and thus someone who considers the forging and sustaining of sincere and open social relationships as being central to his life and commercial activities.

The interplay of civility and diplomacy in the traders’ gendered modes of performing self-respect and conveying respect to other is important because in Afghan society – as in many other contexts across West Asia – public cultural transcripts tend to depict traders as being feminine and lacking in honour, especially when compared to the figure of the autonomous tribesmen (e.g. Edwards 2002: 45). In this context, merchants such as Haji Mirza told me that they are traders because this way of making a living offered the most ‘respectful form of work’ available to them. Trade allows a man to make a living and maintain his honour; this is especially true for travelling as opposed to sedentary trade. Importantly therefore the traders bridge the worlds of both manly autonomy and urbane civility and consider it necessary to display both aspects of their being during the course of their life history.

## Conclusion

For the traders whose lives I have explored in this article civility is a concept that has multidimensional elements and an inherent ambiguity: Afghanistan's educated elite have consistently depicted men such as these as being backward (*aqab monda*) provincials (*atrofiiho*) who lack the urbane forms of civility (*shahri budan*) that arise from long-term participation in Afghanistan's high culture. I have sought however to go beyond an analysis of the ways in which the traders conceptualise and experience their exclusion from such authorised understandings of civility. Instead, my focus has been on the forms of civility that my informants understand as being critical to their everyday lives and modes of making a living.

Doing so, requires understanding the concept of civility alongside that of the notion of diplomacy that the traders themselves invoke as being central to their modes of making social relationships. My suggestion has been that these are overlapping concepts that are helpfully thought of as existing within a broader field of forms of social action that are learned, enacted, and also the focus of self-conscious reflection. Both concepts offer critical insights into related yet distinct aspects of the ways in which long-distance traders from Afghanistan build social relationships and cultivate reputations for trustworthiness amongst their fellow traders. For the traders, diplomacy is a model of conducting social relationships in relationship to which they actively and consciously cultivate their behaviour and fashion their personal and collective identities. They simultaneously regard aspect of their worlds, however, as being morally ambiguous. Acting diplomatically demonstrates sophistication and finesse but also raises questions about the reputations that the traders cultivate for being trustworthy, sincere, and

reputable, reputations upon which the traders' ability build the ties of partnership and credit depend.

Alongside the pride the traders take in being able to act diplomatically, then, they also emphasise the committed ways in which they fashion sincere friendships, often with people from backgrounds very different from their own. As such, in their modes fashioning relationships, the traders constantly walk a fine line between trustworthiness and dissimulation. This suggests that rather than seeking to ascertain whether civility is either a form of artifice premised on performance or a deeper ethical virtue in and of itself, ethnographic accounts are more likely to offer theoretical insight when they take it as given that ambiguity, ambivalence, contradiction, and imperfection are an inbuilt aspect of the ways in which respect is communicated and evaluated.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Guyer argues that it is important to historicise ‘institutions, practices, cultural constructions’ not because they represent ‘age old cultural principles’ but for the insights that doing so offers into understanding ‘the long-term sedimentation of experience’ (Guyer 2004: 172).

<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan’s Turkmen population constitutes a small minority that predominantly live in the country’s north and north-western border regions. See Iron 1975 and Lee 1996.

<sup>3</sup> On the role played by commission agents elsewhere see: Bayly 1993; Hill 1996; Lovejoy 1982. On the social relationships that have underpinned long-distance trade in Muslim societies, see Kuran 2003; Lydon 2009; Udovitch 1970.

<sup>4</sup> Merchants have often negotiated between the values they ascribe to and the types of action expected of them by holders of political authority, often by possessing their own culture while also developing the capacity to ‘play the game’ of courtly forms of political life. See C. Bayly 1993: 239.

<sup>5</sup> Representatives of trading companies have often been used for intelligence-gathering. E.g. Bayly 1996; Hanifi 2011.